

Introduction

A handwritten signature is a sign of civic identification that has important psychological and juridical functions: signers sign contracts, invoices, letters, demands, petitions, charts, and attendance sheets. To obtain their handwritten signatures, employees are asked to show up at a certain office at a certain time. To collect autographs, devoted fans queue up for hours to meet their stars.

But signing does not mean just writing one's own name in one's own hand. Rather, it means trying to cite the signer's unique style of handwriting, which is supposed to be recognizable by others. At banks, each client is asked to register the first signature she gives—the specimen signature—as a sample of her handwriting style. Later on, she will be asked every time to sign again in a way that is supposed to be graphically compatible with her registered specimen signature. To keep her manual expressions as similar as possible across all her attempts to sign, she will be obliged to observe the limit of their acceptable resemblance.

In other words, a handwritten signature is not only a civic sign, but also a personal one. If someone signed in a very different way each time or did not sign at all, she would not get money in her bank, her agreements would not be valid, she would not be believed about her presence at work meetings, her invoices would not be reimbursed, and so forth. Moreover, without having the power of attorney signed by another person's own hand, she cannot sign on behalf of that other person. A handwritten signature is a strictly personal sign.

These reflections are prompted by something that happened to me during my doctoral studies in Paris several years ago. I was living on the Cité Internationale Universitaire de Paris campus, where I had rented a room. One time I wanted to pay my rent, which had to be done in cash.

Unfortunately, local cash dispensers refused to give me money because I had reached my daily limit. This was a new situation for me because I was used to withdrawing my money from cash dispensers. So I went to the bank to withdraw money at the counter. The bank officer asked me for my ID and checked whether there was enough money in my account. Then she asked me to manually sign the document certifying the withdrawal of money from my account. Immediately, a problem occurred. The clerk started to analyze my signature, and clearly did not find it satisfactory. She told me that it was not my signature and she could not give me any money. I asked her what she meant when she said that it was not my signature. After all, she had just seen me signing. She told me that I had signed, “but not with my own signature.” Surprised, I asked for an explanation. From a brief exchange, it transpired that five years ago I had registered a specimen signature that did not sufficiently resemble the signature I had written that day. As a result, she was not allowed to give me money from my account. After I protested, the clerk gave me one more chance. She asked me to sign again one more time, emphasizing that my new attempt must “more exactly resemble” my specimen signature, a scanned copy of which she could see on the computer screen, but which was not visible to me. She wanted to test me. If I passed the test of exact resemblance, I would get money from my account. If not, I would not. Unfortunately, she was visibly even less satisfied with my second signature. This precarious situation made me unhappy because I needed the money so I could pay my rent on time. I asked her to call the branch manager. When he arrived, he came up with a solution to the problem: if I could not sign in a way that sufficiently resembled my registered specimen signature, I would have to register a new official specimen signature instead. But the branch manager warned me strictly that, in the future, I would have to reproduce my signature in a manner sufficiently similar to my newly registered specimen signature. Otherwise, the same situation would occur again. I quickly agreed to this proposed solution, because I realized that it would be useless to discuss with bank employees the fact that I did not know where exactly the limit of sufficient resemblance lies, or the fact that the newly registered specimen signature did not guarantee that the next time I would sign in a way that sufficiently resembles it. Finally, I left the bank with the money for my rent. One could say that it was a satisfactory outcome for both sides. But at the same time, I realized I had just agreed to a solution that did not solve the problem at all. Later on, I could not stop thinking about this incident.

Six years later, I decided to address the philosophical problem that it had been impossible to solve in the bank by investigating the handwritten signature as a medium that represents the civic identity of its signer in contemporary legal mediation politics.

To determine the prevailing scholarly conception of handwritten signature, I concentrate on shared discursive and metaphysical expectations of signature, which I understand as double a priori conditions of possibility for interpreting a handwritten signature. Mapping the discursive limits of scholarly interpretation of signature helps to explain why, in recent decades, graphology has been relegated to the status of esoteric quasi-science and replaced by more “scientific” forensic analysis. The analysis of these two discursive expectations of signature should reveal the reasons for the hierarchy between them. Inspired by Derrida’s deconstruction, I propose to show that the limits of discursive and metaphysical expectations differ, because all discourses are metaphysically conditioned.

While my attempt to understand the metaphysical expectations of handwritten signatures is inspired by deconstruction, unlike Derrida, I emphasize how metaphysical expectations are determined by specific media. I regard the handwritten signature as a specific medium, which is determined by three unsatisfiable metaphysical obligations: the aporia of the naturalness of metaphorical identity; the aporia of the authenticity of the writing act; and the aporia of the identity of the composed style. By means of deconstruction, I seek to show that these complex aporias of handwritten signature are linked to the metaphysical dimension of current legal mediation politics. Despite the differences between investigations in graphology and forensic analysis, both disciplines deal with characteristics of the signer’s psyche: both discourses expect the handwritten signature to be an authentic medium that naturally represents the signer’s unique *soul*. If I systematically prefer the concept of soul to the concept of consciousness, it is because the concept of *soul* concerns both the conscious and the unconscious aspects of the mind. Here I follow Derrida’s books *Psyché* and *On Touching*, but also my own work on graphology as *psychology* and on *psychoanalysis* as *hauntology*.

I start by outlining the philosophical strategy I use in my work. For this purpose, I examine the possibilities and limits of Derrida’s deconstruction, primarily in relation to his understanding of meta-representation, or representation of representation, deferred meaning, unlimited text, writing that overlaps voice, and disseminated *supplementarity*. I initially attempted

to understand deconstruction as a kind of critique or interpretation, but soon realized that it is neither of these things.

From the outset, I seek to give theoretical formulation to the problems that shape my philosophical approach to deconstruction. I note that Derrida's deconstruction does not allow for solving three methodological problems that affect every empirical analysis, including discursive analysis. First, it does not allow any historical, epistemological, or discursive analysis—all of which involve the metaphysically positive historicism that Derrida aims to deconstruct. Second, Derrida's deconstruction admits no positive definition, analysis, or method, so it cannot be used to achieve a positive semiotics. Derrida does not admit any limits of interpretation or context. He admits only a negative ontology of infinite spectrality, tracing, and grafting, which has no unique beginning or end. Derrida's deconstruction of logos produces his version of the ethical problem of the sublime (understood here as writing, *grammé*, which precedes and overlaps logos). In this respect, it is close to Lyotard's postmodern ethics of the sublime as the unrepresentable, the alterity.¹ Third, as everything is text in deconstruction, Derrida's thinking does not allow for particular media or technology, such as the written word and drawn image, to be characterized or analyzed. In these three ways, deconstruction is incompatible with discursive, semiotic, and media analysis. I suggest overcoming these incompatibilities by comparing Derrida's conception of representation with other philosophical approaches, primarily with the work of Foucault, Benjamin, Benveniste, Deleuze, Austin, Searle, Peirce, Eco, and Rousseau.

I also focus on how Derrida's deconstruction could be used to understand the results of discursive analysis of legal texts on signature and handwriting, especially textbooks from the legal field of forensic analysis and from the psychological domain of graphology. As I consider this application methodologically problematic, I supplement Derrida's own work with other philosophical conceptions of representation. Nevertheless, I realize that to make possible the impossible task of deconstruction, I need to deconstruct Derrida's deconstruction. Positive methods such as media, semiotic, or discursive analysis operate outside the marginal philosophical domain where deconstruction operates. I bring them in, using a positive discursive media semiotics to analyze contemporary mediation politics based on a reading of legal texts on handwriting and handwritten signature. This supplementation is necessary to show that discursive semiotics is not aware of its own totalitarian violence: it is not haunted by Derrida's ethical "ghost," a memento of the method as such.

Finally, I formulate a deconstructed media semiotics, inspired both by Derrida's deconstruction and Eco's semiotics of conventional realism. I understand the handwritten signature as a specific medium that produces aporetic signs. This allows me to shift from the ethically conscious melancholy of deconstruction toward a politically effective positivity of the signature sign.